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ABSTRACT

There is a great deal of concern on the part of not only educators, but also politicians, counselors, psychologists, researchers, members of boards of education, and parents, regarding current issues concerning kindergarten education. Central to these issues is the push for academics. With this push has come standardized testing, workbooks, and a decrease in the value given to play as a worthwhile activity for 5-year-olds. In addition, the rate of failure among kindergarten students has given rise to discussion about cut-off dates for entering kindergarten and pretesting for kindergarten children. There has also been concern about whether kindergarten programs should be half-day or full-day. Although there are differing opinions among educators as to how to resolve these issues, teachers are the ones who are best able to take into account all the issues, and come up with solutions that will be in the best interests of children. (PCB)

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The Present Kindergarten Dilemma: A Discussion

Susan Partridge

The present kindergarten dilemma has captured the attention not only of educators but of many others, among them politicians, counselors, psychologists, researchers, boards of education and parents, some of whom are deeply concerned, even angry.

What is a kindergarten? Webster's (12) definition in 1986 is the same as the one found in the 1981 edition of the dictionary. It follows:

1: A school or division of a school below the first grade, usually serving people of the 4 to 6 age group and fostering their natural growth and social development through constructive play with blocks, clay, crayons and by group games, songs, and exercise.

Though the definition has remained the same, the practice, obviously, has not. Why not?

The rising rate of failure among kindergarten students surfaced and gained momentum with the school-improvement movement of the 80's and made many concerned people feel that academics have been pushed in kindergartens to the neglect of development skills. The standardized testing accompanying the academic programs has been called unreliable by some and has resulted in the serious problem which they feel is "the labeling of children at an early age."

With so many groups concerned, a great many opinions as to the solution of the problem have been articulated. The reading of these various opinions has raised a question: Who is it who

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truly has the best interests of children in mind in his/her proposal, or, as Harold Howe II (7), a senior lecturer at the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, expresses it, "Who is the champion for children?"

A growing number of state legislatures and school districts are requiring children to be older before entering kindergarten. Anne Pavuk (8) has reported a number of these age changes. It is felt that at best this is only a temporary solution. Shepard and Smith (9) found that the oldest three-month first grade children scored at the 71st percentile and the youngest three-month children scored at the 61st percentile. They caution, "A major point to be made when we are considering practical rather than statistical significance is that achievement differences between the oldest and youngest first graders are small, on the order of seven or eight percentile points."

There will always be a group of youngest children in kindergartens who fall behind their classmates, but is it age alone or a combination of age and ability? Shepard and Smith found virtually no difference in achievement between the oldest and youngest first graders who were above the 75th or 50th percentile points of their respective age intervals and that the age trend seemed to come from those children below the 25th percentile of their respective age groups.

The findings of Shepard and Smith in this regard were experienced again and again throughout decades of educational work. An explanation follows:

A child was supposed to be five years of age by December 1st in order to enter kindergarten in September of that year. Invariably, the child with a low IQ would have a birthday late in November and, therefore, satisfy the cut-off date, whereas the birthday of a child with an above-average IQ would fall a few days after December 1st, and he/she would have to wait another year before being admitted to kindergarten.

Requiring children to be older before entering kindergarten, though upheld by some legislators, is seriously questioned by others. Rep. Bill Alexander (1), a North Carolina legislator is reported by Paul T. O'Connor as saying, "By pushing back the cut-off date, you're putting a terrible strain on the sharp kids who are ready to go to school." Alexander, apparently, spoke of screening prospective kindergarten students, but, reportedly, was quickly countered by Richard Clifford (4) of the Frank Porter Graham School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who debated both the logistics and logic of this practice.

Clifford explained that in pushing back the cut-off date, many parents would be forced to pay for an extra year of day care for their children. He added that since the state provides day care to many children, this would add to state expenses.

Dr. Clifford explained, as have others, that regardless of a cut-off date, there would always be some children in a class who are younger than others. Undoubtedly, some of these children will fall behind their classmates, and, of course, they will present a challenge to their teachers. It is truly believed that

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good teachers can, with the cooperation of parents and the "authorities", meet this challenge.

Dr. Clifford's logic seems easily followed, and it involves parents, taxpayers, lawmakers, and teachers. The recent remarks of two mothers, each of whom claimed to be speaking for many, seem to expand a bit on Clifford's logic. The remarks follow:

First Mother: "School is a cheap baby sitter."

Second Mother: "And a safe baby sitter!
That's important in light of what we're
now hearing about some day care
centers."

Of course, there are taxpayers who have no children in school and who, therefore, might object to additional taxes.

Recommendations of some legislators give us pause as they seem to focus on one factor that is politically expedient, whereas there are many factors to be considered in resolving the kindergarten dilemma. Some legislators, for example, claim that the standardized tests accompanying the academic programs create stress in children and that they've heard this from parents. A question arises: Does EACH of these legislators have the children's interests as a number one concern, or is it, perhaps, that parental votes are a chief concern?

Use should be made of all available resources in helping children, but especially the teachers, for it is quite obvious that they are the most important resource in the educational lives of the children. Considered even more important is the

most efficient use of the very best teachers. Needless to say, parents, too, play a very important role in the education of their children, but good teachers have always sought, and often received, the cooperation of parents and all other available, helpful personnel -- speech therapists, psychologists, social workers, etc.

Fortunately, a number of reputable organizations as well as "notables" who seem knowledgeable about the education of children have, apparently, "joined forces" with teachers in the hope of serving the best interests of ALL children.

In an article entitled "The Carnegie Report -- a Call for Redesigning the Schools," Tucker, M. and Mandel, D. (11) of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, Washington, D.C. wrote, "We must invest teachers with a much greater degree of trust and responsibility to render professional judgments about the most appropriate educational treatments." They add, "Lead teachers would play a key role in setting the instructional policy of a school and in involving other teachers in decisions that affect instructional policy." Note, in the title, the authors' use of the word, redesigning, which seems to indicate that more than "repairing" is needed, a thought held by others, among them Theodore R.Sizer (10), Chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools.

Teachers have begun to voice their opinions about existing kindergarten programs, and, fortunately, their number is increasing. Furthermore, they are commending one another for taking the

initiative in speaking out in the best interests of kindergarten children. This is evidenced in a very recent edition of Education Week in which two early childhood educators, Margaret Egenhoefer and Nancy K. Webster (5), from two different states, congratulated and thanked Harriet A. Egertson (6) for her commentary, "Recapturing Kindergarten for 5-Year-Olds" which appeared in a previous edition of Education Week. As a matter of fact, continued reading of teachers' letters in various periodicals makes one feel that teachers are gaining courage in speaking out against some existing policies. Very recently, Kenny Brown and Diane Brown (3) of Oklahoma, spoke out against developmental-placement procedures as an "outmoded" theory. Their letter follows:

To the Editor:

In her Commentary "Recapturing Kindergarten for 5-Year-Olds" (May 20, 1987), Harriet A. Egertson described questionable kindergarten testing and grade-placement procedures in Nebraska and throughout the country. Her assessment certainly applies to Oklahoma.

In 1985, the state legislature passed a law mandating "readiness" screening of kindergarteners. As a result, many children in Oklahoma are now being denied access to public education because of one test, usually the Gesell. Other children, assessed by the same instrument, are retained or tracked into two-year-kindergarten programs.

When parents question test results and refuse to submit to the school's recommendation to hold out or retain a child or to place him in a transition class, they are often accused by educators of not having the child's best interests in mind. Yet educators have adopted readiness testing and developmental-placement policies in an unquestioning fashion.

As Ms. Egertson indicated, educators are not studying the reliability and validity of screening

instruments. She also pointed out that a good deal of discrimination is occurring; thus, equal educational opportunities are being denied to many young children.

But Ms. Egertson did not address another fundamental flaw in developmental-placement procedures, which is that most methods of placement are based on an outmoded theory of developmental psychology that overemphasizes heredity.

Developmental placement, as it is usually practiced today, is based on the theoretical concepts of Arnold L. Gesell, a pioneering developmental psychologist of the 1930's. While Gesell made important contributions to the field of child development, it must be remembered that he was constrained by the assumption that virtually all child behavior is predicated on inborn, biological structures.

The Gesell method of developmental placement says that if a child is identified as unready for school, then his unreadiness is caused by inherited slow development. Parents, therefore, are told that the only way to really help a developmentally immature child is to give him an extra year to grow.

Educators who support readiness testing and developmental-placement policies are choosing to exclude, retain, and track young children, rather than to accommodate individual differences and teach with the best methods of instruction. In doing so, they are ignoring the vast amount of research that indicates that environmental variables do make a difference in child development and school readiness.

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The following poem, "June: A Teacher Reflects," by Ellen T. Johnston-Hale, was spotted in The Durham Morning Herald on May 28, 1987. It, too, shows that many teachers have the best interests of the children at heart and are able to express them-

selves very well -- even poetically -- in this regard.

Have I fanned their curiosity?
Will they make tracks
to fields we've only touched upon
with ordinary, endless facts?
Have they begun to grow,
reach for the sun,
and want much more

than I have given them?
Have I released their best?
Or, God forbid,
have I only trained them to score,
(high enough to placate everyone),
on a test?

Teachers are well aware that there are many problems to be faced in resolving the present dilemma, among them, a steady diet of workbooks, full-day programs, standardized achievement tests, the failure of authorities to view play as valuable in the lives of 5-year-olds, class size, the cut-off date for entering kindergarten, and the pre-testing of kindergarteners.

It is readily acknowledged that there are differing opinions among teachers themselves as to some of the existing issues. This is understandable because, undoubtedly, each is basing his/her opinion, at least in part, upon his/her particular experience. However, it is truly believed that teachers are capable of coming up with solutions that would be in the best interests of the children because all issues would be considered -- not just one such as the cut-off date for entering kindergarten.

Most encouraging to teachers is the fact that many, notables among them, believe that the outstanding students should be encouraged to enter teaching. One such notable is Ernest Boyer

(2), President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, who expressed his belief in the importance of having the very best teachers for beginners thus: "I do believe that if this nation would give as much status to first-grade teachers as we do to full professors, that one act alone would bring excellence to higher education." Decades of educational experience evoke the word, amen, to Mr. Boyer's statement, for, throughout these decades of educational experiences, witness was borne again and again to the long-lasting, devastating effects of early failure.

Mr. Boyer's statement might be extended to include kindergarten where, in many cases, academics are now being taught. It is a personal feeling that it should be whether or not academics are taught because early failure is devastating.

Conclusions

In order to serve the best interests of the children, it is concluded that many of the changes made in kindergarten programs in recent years must be reconsidered. It is further concluded that teachers should be given top priority in recommending possible solutions to the many existing problems and that they should be supported, not threatened, in so doing.

Implications

Teachers' judgments should be given much more consideration in designing programs that would serve the best interests of ALL the children.

The concept of lead teachers who would play a key role in instructional policy and involve the other teachers in decisions should be carefully considered.

Teachers should continue to voice their opinions about programs, as their training and experience lets them know "what works" and "what doesn't work."

It is felt that the authorities should consider Ernest Boyer's reasoning (herein stated) about having the very best teachers for the little beginners. This might encourage good students to consider teaching as a profession.

Cooperation with parents and the use of all other available, helpful resources should be considered as an important part of programs that would serve ALL the children.

Educators should always try to keep abreast of research that might help them to do a better job.

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